



*Citation for published version:*

Tilley, L & Woodthorpe, K 2011, 'Is it the end for anonymity as we know it? A critical examination of the ethical principle of anonymity in the context of 21st century demands on the qualitative researcher', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 197-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110394073>

*DOI:*

[10.1177/1468794110394073](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110394073)

*Publication date:*

2011

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

## University of Bath

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Is it the end for anonymity as we know it? A critical examination of the ethical principle of anonymity in the context of twenty first century demands on the qualitative researcher**

*Liz Tilley and Kate Woodthorpe*

**LIZ TILLEY, The Open University**

**KATE WOODTHORPE, University of Bath**

**Abstract**

Told from the perspective of two UK based early career researchers, this paper is an examination of contemporary challenges posed when dealing with the ethical principle of anonymity in qualitative research, specifically at the point of dissemination. Drawing on their respective doctoral experience and literature exploring the difficulties that can arise from the application of anonymity with regard to historical and geographical contexts, the authors question the applicability of the principle of anonymity alongside pressures to disseminate widely. In so doing, the paper considers anonymity in relation to the following: demonstrating value for money to funders; being accountable to stakeholders; involvement in knowledge transfer; and the demands of putting as much information ‘out there’ as possible, particularly on the internet. In light of these pressures, the paper suggests that the standard of anonymity in the context of the twenty first century academic world may need to be rethought.

**Key words:** accountability, anonymity, dissemination, ethics, knowledge transfer

## Introduction

As a guiding principle of qualitative research, anonymity is a key ethical concept that has thus been a source of much academic discussion, not least in the pages of this journal and its contemporaries (see Hookway, 2008; Kelly, 2009; Nespor, 2000; Stewart and Williams, 2005; van den Hoonaard, 2003; Walford, 2005; Wiles et al, 2006, 2008). Normalised through well established ethical codes of practice (see, for example, American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics, 1999; the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines, 2003), often it is mentioned only briefly, and usually unproblematically, in accounts of the research process (see for example Alterio, 2004; Scott, 2004).

But where does this leave the researcher who wants to identify their sites and/or participants? Or the participants who want to be identified? What of those researchers who feel they *have* to identify their research sites and/or participants? Certainly, there will always be qualitative research studies in which in the anonymisation of participants is appropriate, for example some research with children (see Chistensen and Prout, 2002), or research with participants for whom achieving informed consent may be a complex undertaking (Royal College of Nursing, 2005). Anonymisation may also be necessary when participants are in a complicated relationship with the researcher, for example, in the case of students that the researcher also teaches (see the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines, 2003).

We are not disputing this. However, there may be times when the principle of anonymity conflicts with the aims of the research, with dissemination activity, and with the researcher's obligation(s) to be accountable to funders and engage in knowledge transfer. Drawing on the authors' respective experiences of dealing with such issues, this paper considers the application

of the principle of anonymity in dissemination to suggest that a universal endorsement of anonymity may not be consistent with the aims and scope of all qualitative research endeavours (see Marzano, 2007; Nespor, 2000).

Before introducing our discussion about the normalisation of anonymity, it is important to note briefly that through problematising anonymity in the qualitative research endeavour the purpose of the paper is not to provide instant remedies for the issues raised. Furthermore, it is not intended to provide a theoretical interrogation of anonymity as an ethical principle. Rather, it is to highlight the challenges that the standard of anonymity poses when it is applied in dissemination in light of the pressures faced by the twenty first century qualitative researcher. We have made a deliberate effort not to conflate anonymity with confidentiality and recognise the importance of the latter in ensuring ethical standards and legal obligations are addressed and upheld in the research process. Confidentiality refers to the management of private information ‘that has been communicated in trust of confidence, such that disclosure would or could incur particular prejudice’ (Giordano et al, 2007: 264). Anonymity refers specifically to removing or obscuring the names of participants or research sites, and not including information that might lead participants or research sites to be identified (Walford, 2005). Clearly, there will be instances in which anonymity provides a useful tool to help ensure that confidentiality is maintained. However, confidentiality is a complex process that involves more than merely disguising the identities of research participants or sites. This paper therefore focuses solely on the place of anonymity in qualitative research, and its application in practice. Implicit within our discussion is the suggestion that a decision to anonymise data findings should not necessarily lead researchers to assume that they have fully addressed the various components of confidentiality.

The paper is structured into three sections. First, we discuss the principle of anonymity and the ways in which it has become well-established in ethical codes of practice. Second, after introducing our respective research projects, we consider some of the pressures faced by UK qualitative researchers, particularly in dissemination, knowledge transfer, and accountability. We then reflect on how these pressures challenge ideas about anonymisation in qualitative research. In light of these contemporary pressures, we conclude by asking whether or not anonymity - as a normative ethical principle in qualitative research - needs to be rethought.

### **Anonymity: an ethical norm**

At the time of writing a number of research codes state clearly that anonymity is a desirable standard in qualitative research, primarily as a means to ensure confidentiality and to minimise the risk of harm to participants (see the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics, 1999; British Sociological Association, 2002; the Social Research Association, 2003). In this paper we use Walford's definition of anonymity whereby:

... it simply means that we do not name the person or research site involved but, in research, it is usually extended to mean that we do not include information about any individual or research site that will enable that individual or research site to be identified by others (2005: 85).

As readers of this journal will no doubt be familiar, the origins of the need for anonymity in research can be accredited to a biomedical model of research whereby the researched were perceived to be in need of protection (Van den Hoonaard, 2003). Although qualitative ethical guidelines have evolved and been adapted by qualitative researchers to encompass ethical

challenges related to research that involves, for example, integration into communities (ethnographic research) or research undertaken by participants themselves (participatory and emancipatory research), the idea of protecting participants by anonymising their identity remains popular (Kelly, 2009; see for example Baez, 2002: 40). Although problems in achieving complete anonymity in particular types of research are reflected in guidelines such as that from the Economic and Social Research Council (2005, alongside the various research/representative organisations noted above) the importance of anonymity in qualitative research is supported by a range of methodological texts intended for both new and experienced researchers (see Bryman, 2004; Darlington and Scott, 2002; Silverman, 2005). In light of these texts' presentation of the benefits of anonymity, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent attempts to provide robust and consistent ethical frameworks in social sciences research (Butler, 2002; DH, 2005; ESRC, 2005), have afforded a critique of anonymity comparatively little attention. The result is that a number of ethics committees, in the field of health and social care for example, further formalise anonymity as a methodological given in their written guidelines.

As a consequence, qualitative researchers, particularly those engaged in ethnographic case studies and those committed to participatory (see Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) or emancipatory approaches (see Walmsley, 2001), can find themselves in something of an ethical and methodological tight spot. On the one hand, to reveal identifying features challenges the normal expectation of the benefit of protection that anonymity brings; on the other, upholding the principle of anonymity could actually serve to undermine the research and/or participants' autonomy (Giordano, 2007). In particular, where participants are active agents in the research - as they can be within participatory or emancipatory approaches - there is a strong case to be made for offering individuals and organisations the choice as to whether or not their identities

are disclosed, even if this may create conflict between participants' and researchers' autonomy (Giordano et al, 2007). Grinyer (2002) has written about how respondents may feel themselves 'losing their ownership' of the data when it becomes anonymised, albeit in the context of disseminating research on the effects of a diagnosis of cancer on young people. Further afield, concern over data ownership is a central tenet in much (auto)biographical life story and oral history work, for example with people with intellectual disabilities, in which a key feature of the research is its role in 'giving voice' to previously silenced groups (Atkinson et al, 1997; Mitchell et al, 2006; Traustadottir and Johnson, 2000). Subsequently, the expectation that anonymity should be maintained throughout the research process, and crucially with regard to this paper at the point of dissemination, can serve to *create* further ethical challenges when research sites and participants are 'dislodged from their histories and geographies' (Nespor, 2000: 550).

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in recent years a small yet growing number of researchers have begun to question the prevailing orthodoxy surrounding the topic of anonymity, particularly in the context of qualitative research (see for example Piper and Simons, 2005). Obscuring or hiding the identities of settings and individuals has been critiqued on various practical grounds, not least in relation to the gulf between the 'promise' of anonymity and the reality of 'practice' (Snyder, 2002). This has included an examination of the level of visibility and engagement required in qualitative research (Kelly, 2009); the opting by researchers for 'convenient' research sites (Walford, 2005); and the necessity to provide some contextual information when writing up the findings, even if specific details are removed or pseudonyms adopted (Nespor, 2000). All of these complicate the principle of anonymity and may even increase the likelihood that in the process of dissemination participants recognize themselves, or are recognized by others (Walford, 2005; van den Hoonaard, 2003; Nespor, 2000). The intention

of this paper is to contribute to these discussions by situating these issues within contemporary pressures that qualitative researchers in the UK can face with regard to dissemination. Later in the paper we consider the extent to which the pressure to disseminate widely means that a determined investigator could uncover the identities of (anonymised) research sites, research participants, or researchers themselves (if the dissemination called for such anonymisation). Indeed, the investigator might not have to be that determined – sometimes using Boolean language and typing ‘research AND XXX fieldsite’ into a search engine such as Google may be sufficient.

In this paper we suggest that contemporary technological (for example, in the widespread use of the internet to disseminate findings) and political (for example, in terms of funding and demonstrating value for money as a researcher) developments bring the dilemma of anonymity into even sharper relief, raising ever more pressing questions about its application in research dissemination and whether or not the idea of protecting participants via anonymising either them or the research site is either possible or desirable.

## **The background to our research projects**

The idea for this paper emerged from discussions between the authors regarding their respective decisions to identify their research sites in their doctoral research. Although both authors identified the sites, Woodthorpe (2007) chose not to identify the participants, whereas Tilley (2006) named the individual participants who had been interviewed during the course of the research. The reasons for these distinctions are covered below. Both research projects were



studies of UK organisations: one was an exploration of advocacy organisations for people with intellectual disabilities in Buckinghamshire (Tilley, 2006), the other an ethnographic study of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium (Woodthorpe, 2007). In addition, both projects were designed with the aim of grounding the organisations in their historical, geographical and cultural contexts (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Dunkerly, 1988). The findings of each study suggested that the organisational culture witnessed was the result of area specific factors including localised historical processes, practices and key events; economic and political concerns; and complex stakeholder relationships. We both felt therefore that anonymising the detailed contextual information would be counter productive as it would obscure how the respective sites were the unique products of local dynamics. Consequently, while identifying the sites may have limited our claims to transferability, it did allow us to ‘emphasise connections among people, places, and events and to highlight the systems of relations, and processes of articulation that produce boundaries and entities’ (Nespor, 2000: 556).

Certainly, we were both aware that our research posed potential risks to the sites we were studying and had the capacity to harm the interests of the organisations and the people employed there. Both projects involved paid employees of the organisations being researched, a group of people who may be vulnerable if the research exposed, for instance, rule breaking, mismanagement, or bad practice. This is not to say that either of us uncovered such problems – rather that we were mindful that these concerns needed to be taken into account when researching sites of employment. In the face of such complexities, the decision of whether or not to anonymise the site was not taken lightly for either project. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent to us that masking the identities of our respective research sites would be problematic, and indeed undesirable, for a number of reasons. For example, Tilley’s (2006) review of the

literature on advocacy organisations for people with intellectual disabilities suggested that the organisations she was exploring were working in ways that could be viewed as innovative, and may offer examples of good practice that would be useful for other organisations to draw upon. This being the case, she contended that it would be beneficial to the sector (and indeed to the organisations concerned in terms of reputation and prestige) to clarify exactly where (and in what context) these organisations were operating. Correspondingly, Woodthorpe (2007) recognised at an early stage in her research that the local context was highly significant in understanding the structures, processes and politics of the cemetery she was researching. In addition, because the City of London Corporation had part funded her doctoral research, there was an explicit assumption on the funder's part that they would be acknowledged at the dissemination stage, particularly in trade publications. It soon became clear therefore that even if the cemetery were to be anonymised in academic outputs, it would take only a matter of moments for a determined investigator to 'link' her research with the funding body, therefore facilitating an educated guess with regard to which cemetery her research was detailing.

### *Seeking consent*

Bearing these issues in mind, both of us took steps to ensure that participants in our research were clear about the implications of identifying the research sites. We both sought consent from participants where appropriate, and wherever possible, did our best to ensure this consent was fully informed. As Tilley's project also proposed to name individuals, including people with intellectual disabilities who were being interviewed and observed, she designed information and consent forms, which were approved by her University's Research Ethics

Committee, and sent to all potential interviewees. The two forms were piloted with a group of people with intellectual disabilities at the outset of the research, and a skilled support person talked through the forms with participants who could not read to ensure they were clear about the content. Both forms were also given to non-disabled participants. The information sheet outlined the research aims clearly and was written in an accessible style alongside visual images. The consent form was designed to clarify how the interview transcripts were to be used, but also to give respondents the opportunity to make any amendments they felt were necessary. For example, one non-disabled participant added a clause which is indicated below in italics:

I agree that Liz Tilley may use my comments in publications such as journal articles, book chapters and conference papers (*with the proviso that the date the comments were made is indicated, as the situation continues to evolve*).

In the case of Tilley's research, the consent form also enabled people to be anonymised if they preferred, although it should be noted that no participants requested anonymity.

In the case of Woodthorpe's research, the seeking of consent was slightly different in that the study was an ethnography (using interviews, participant observation and secondary data analysis) that examined the perspectives of three groups: users, staff and the local community. To ensure participants in the cemetery were not identifiable, all identifying features of the individual, the area of the cemetery in which they were approached, or the landscape which they referred to, for example, were removed. Local community participants were obscured in the sense that they were not asked to provide any identifying information so Woodthorpe had no means of knowing who they were or where they were from. Out of the three groups, however, staff proved to be the most challenging group with relation to anonymity, as their responses

necessarily ‘gave away’ who they were – and what their opinions were about the site and its management. For this reason, only contributions which did not provide any indication of who the participant staff member was were included in the thesis.

In addition to our respective efforts to ensure that we were transparent and accountable, we both provided participants with the opportunity to feed back to us, via reading through and amending their transcripts or playing back the interview tapes and offering corrections before the data analysis stage (Tilley, 2006), or reading through the final draft of the thesis before it was submitted (Woodthorpe, 2007).

### *Interdisciplinarity*

It is important to also note here that neither of the authors’ PhD theses were grounded definitively within a particular discipline. Between our research projects we drew upon methodological tools from sociology, history, anthropology and organisation studies. Despite the richness inherent in much interdisciplinary research, challenges can and do arise from an approach which combines methods from disciplines which may differ in their epistemological foundations (Bonnell, 1980; Hall, 1992; Tuchman, 1994). The issue of anonymity exemplifies some of these tensions. For example, the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2009) states that:

Anthropological researchers must determine in advance whether their host/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and make every effort to comply with those wishes (section A, point 3).

The Oral History Society ethical guidelines written by Alan Ward (2009) go further, advising:

It is difficult and often impossible to anonymise interviews and transcripts effectively. Custodians should avoid agreeing to anonymise interviews unless the content is of great value or significance, and there is no alternative. Agreements to mask the identity of interviewees *must* have a time limit.

This ethical standpoint presumably springs from an ontological concern in historical analysis that historical processes cannot be fully understood in the abstract, and necessarily need to be contextualized. Furthermore, by not anonymising participants, this perspective can provide a sense of ownership and empowerment for the (named) participant. This differs from the sociological approach to research where it is common for nameless case study examples to be drawn upon to make wider generalisations, to ‘make representations or texts movable, replicable and citable’ (Nespor, 2000: 551, drawing on Urban, 1996). As pieces of research that were bridging these disciplinary boundaries – and with an intention to be accessible for colleagues and stakeholders within these varying disciplines – we both had to navigate these disciplinary differences, with anonymity presenting some of the most difficult challenges.

This navigation was framed by an ongoing tension we both felt between being a responsible qualitative researcher, but also being an academic who wants to make a difference (however small) to society. This tension has been examined in more detail by well-established ethnographer Martyn Hammersley, who argued that those undertaking social research can experience ‘a tension between a primary concern with producing knowledge versus an immediate and urgent commitment to bringing about some improvement in the world’ (2003: 31).

Thus, while both authors recognised that research projects have a tendency to change over the course of the research process, thus making it difficult to fully predict all the possible implications of the research methods and findings (including the decision to reveal the identities of research sites and individuals), we attempted to maintain an honest dialogue with participants at all times, and drew upon the expertise of supervisors and other colleagues to help steer us through the various dilemmas that arose with regard to both anonymity and negotiating the aforementioned tension that Hammersley refers to. However, since completing our doctorates, both of us have faced new challenges with regard to anonymity in the process of disseminating our research findings, and it is to these that we now turn.

### **Anonymity in wider context**

Moving into the more discursive content of this paper, we base what follows on the following assumption that academics such as ourselves are pursuing a two-fold task: first to produce knowledge and analysis that contributes to intellectual discussion reviewed by our peers, and second to disseminate this in appropriate forms and via a range of avenues into wider society. This first pursuit is arguably where the principle of anonymity has been fashioned and normalised as a component of ethical discussion. It is the second point, however, that raises our concerns as career young academics in particular who are under pressure in terms of the longevity of our careers to commit to disseminating widely, demonstrating accountability to funders, and engaging in knowledge transfer activities. These pressures are particularly acute in the UK for those colleagues employed as contract researchers, which typically involves working on a project for six months to three years at a time. Short term contracts such as these necessitate

the importance of demonstrating publishing credentials and the ability to undertake the tasks we have listed above. We detail these concerns further in what follows via three discussions about (i) the information age, (ii) accountability to funders, and (iii) knowledge transfer.

### *i. The Information Age*

Anonymity and the internet is an area of growing interest for many academics and has been explored extensively elsewhere (see for example Flicker et al, 2004; James and Busher, 2006; Stewart and Williams, 2005). However, the extent to which the prospective longevity of web pages and potential lack of control over the way in which information is utilized by others in the public arena created via the internet (Papacharissi, 2002) has implications for anonymity in the dissemination of social research in the online environment, has been little explored.

Nonetheless, concerns over anonymity online have already been raised elsewhere, albeit particularly in relation to the way in which it can shield internet users and the implications this has for accountability. In 1999 (comparatively early days for the internet), Nissenbaum questioned the value of anonymity online. Little analysis, however, has been done on those who want to deliberately identify themselves.

Our question is this: what happens when, as a researcher keen to get your ideas ‘out there’, you do not want to anonymise your research? Or when your participants have requested or agreed to being identified? Or when you include identifying details in your online dissemination activities, such as short reports for policy organisations? Certainly, in light of the increasing expectation for academics to disseminate widely, to attract further funding and keep their jobs (Hammersley, 2003), it is now common practice for a lot of information about research

activities to end up in various places, especially on the internet. This includes conventional scholarly papers such as this, but also websites, reports, newsletter articles and so on. The extent to which identifying details are revealed in these varying outputs might differ considerably. However, how anonymity corresponds with these demands for dissemination, particularly online, has lacked adequate discussion. As Van den Hoonaard (2003: 145), has pointed out:

the stage where anonymity matters most is when one's work reaches the publication stage, whether as article, report or book. Yet, research-ethics codes usually ignore this stage. Given the fact that research-ethics codes rest on a bio-medical model of research, involving the aggregating of vast amounts of data and the early stripping of names from those data, bio-medical research does not need to struggle with the challenge of anonymity in the publishing stage. For qualitative researchers, the situation is rather different.

The sheer volume of this information can challenge the principle of anonymity in identifying sites – and the researcher themselves - particularly if the researcher is varying the extent to which they are anonymising their research. In line with legal requirements of the UK Data Protection Act that presumes that participants should be anonymised (Grinyer, 2002), some scholarly outputs (for example, at the time of writing, the *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*) may request that the location of the research is anonymised or obscured in order to protect participants. Yet how does this correspond when the identifying information is already 'out there' on the internet? It is commonplace for short reports to a non-academic journal or newsletter to be open access (that is, anyone can read them online), and in these reports the author and their research site can be named. Not only does this challenge the value of anonymising research sites, it can have implications for the peer review process for papers such



as this, where authors are anonymised but their research site is not. One could search online for research undertaken at the site and thereby deduce the author's name and position.

Furthermore, there are implications for research participants who have agreed or perhaps even *want* to be identified, who may stumble across their contributions to projects in short reports or papers such as this and find that – in line with the ethical codes imposed by certain avenues for dissemination – their identity has been removed. The integrity of the research and the researcher could be seriously undermined if this were to happen, yet with many outlets pursuing a blanket policy of anonymity on the grounds of protecting participants, then it may be inevitable.

The longevity of, and access to, research outputs that the internet now affords us, as an academic population that is under increasing pressure to disseminate findings as widely as possible, is therefore extremely challenging. Bearing this in mind, perhaps it is now time to re-address anonymity within ethical codes of practice at the point of dissemination (van den Hoonaard, 2003), to take into account the ways in which the practice of producing research outputs is shifting via the online environment.

## *ii. Accountability to funders*

Anonymity is further complicated by the growing emphasis on demonstrating accountability and transparency in qualitative research, particularly to funders. In the UK, this is part of a wider 'audit culture' that has swept through the higher education sector (Sparkes, 2007). This growing focus on accountability has often taken the form of 'reporting back' to the funder

and raises an important question regarding what happens when the funders are the organisation in which the research takes place.

For example, in the case of Woodthorpe (2007), who was partly funded by the City of London Corporation to do her research on the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium, to be accountable meant demonstrating to the public authority of the City of London Corporation that the resources they had provided had been ‘well spent’ through research dissemination. This was accompanied by an expectation – of the Corporation and the author herself – that this would involve naming the cemetery as the source of data. Within the process of dissemination via journal papers the expectation of identifying the site led to something of a dilemma with regard to anonymity, particularly in the peer review process where to identify the site did not correspond with some journals’ requests for identifying features to be removed. Yet *not* to identify it led to the disassociation of the geographical and historical context of the site.

For PhD students and early career academics in the UK, a move towards accountability to funders has been established in a 2001 Joint Research Councils Skills Statement entitled ‘Joint Statement of Skills Training Requirements of Research Postgraduates’ whereby students and new post-doctoral researchers are required to evidence transparently that they have accumulated a wide range of transferable skills through their time as a funded doctoral student. Effectively, this means demonstrating that (usually public, that is, state funded) resources have been put to good use in the professional development of transferable research skills. Students are expected to demonstrate this through a variety of outputs that illustrate their capacity to communicate to different audiences and in different formats, via peer reviewed papers, conference papers, presentations to trade organisations, and the aforementioned reports and newsletter articles. However, as noted above, the more pressure there is to put as much information ‘out there’ and

demonstrate worth via ‘value for money’ in research terms, so increases the possibility that information may be garnered from different sources that could compromise the researcher’s efforts to anonymise findings, again suggesting a need to address the principle of anonymity at the point of dissemination.

### *iii. Knowledge transfer*

Our final point is that, as seen in the ‘Joint Statement of Skills Training Requirements of Research Postgraduates’, importance is being attached to the ability to be able to disseminate research to several audiences that are both academic and non-academic. No longer can it be assumed that,

the outcome of research is typically a research report and publication in journals which are seen by a relatively small and select group of professional researchers and/or practitioners (Wiles et al, 2006: 296).

The practice of disseminating scholarly research to a wide range of audiences has broadly come to be known as the act of ‘knowledge transfer’. Typically, the extent to which an academic is successful in disseminating information into the public domain – that is, engaging in knowledge transfer - depends on the quantity, array and rapport of contacts (Huberman, 1995) that the researcher has with their peers and external practitioners.

Increasingly, however, practitioners and those working in ‘the real world’ want to see research that is evidence-based (Popay and Williams, 1998). Evidence-based in this sense means that it originates from empirical data that is both transparent and accessible, and intricately

linked to ‘real-world’ examples. Much of this has emerged from a trend in recent years towards an acknowledgement that researchers should engage with policy makers, especially if funded with ‘public’ money, and has contributed to debates about the social worth and commodification of knowledge (see for example Jessop, 2000). Consequently attempts have been made to counteract the conventional perception of academic researchers as ‘distant observers’ of the field that they study (for example in statements such as the aforementioned Joint Research Council’s Skills Statement) and involve a growing pressure on researchers to provide robust real-world evidence that can contribute to policy development and practice – in other words, research that can have an ‘impact’.

So how does this shifting emphasis on real-world evidence correspond with the principle of anonymity? Is it satisfactory for the researcher engaged in knowledge transfer activities to produce findings that anonymise the sites in which the research was conducted, or the participants? The ways in which these dilemmas are addressed have significant implications for trust in academics as to whether or not the audience can substantiate the analysis presented (Walford, 2005), which can in turn have implications for trust in sources of findings in terms of knowledge transfer (see Wiles et al, 2006). In an environment that is increasingly seeking transparent and transferable analysis, the principle of anonymity can therefore feel distinctly at odds with the demands and expectations of practitioners wanting ‘real-life’ examples.

For example, in the case of Tilley’s (2006) study on advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities, it is common for such research to be discussed at multi-stakeholder events that may include academics, policy-makers, practitioners in statutory and independent services, and self-advocates. At such events it is rarely appropriate to anonymise the research site. In part, this is because delegates are interested in learning about the context of specific practice. What is more,

it would be difficult to hide the identities of organisations well known in the sector. In addition, discussing a research site in an abstract, nameless sense also raises the issue of accessibility in the intellectual disability field. Identifying the organisations that participated in the research allows the researcher to show visual images from the research site, which can be an important tool in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to engage with the material. The papers presented at such events are frequently recorded and uploaded onto a publicly accessible website, to enable people who were unable to attend to hear about the research, and to give delegates an opportunity to listen to the paper again if they so wish (visit [www.open.ac.uk/hsc/lds/site](http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/lds/site) for examples). Demonstrating that the research is authentic and not imaginary sometimes involves being specific about the context(s) within which the research took place, and can therefore render anonymity in terms of geographical pinpointing a difficult principle to uphold. This is further compounded when such material becomes available on publicly available internet spaces.

### **Discussion: the twenty first century researcher**

So where does all this leave qualitative researchers, particularly those who are committed to the dissemination of their research findings in both academic and non academic contexts? While issues related to working within and outside academia have been considered elsewhere (see Bradshaw, 2003), few critiques or pieces of guidance exist on the reality of the implementation and application of the ethical principles by which researchers conduct their work (with a few exceptions, see Tilley and Gormley, 2007).

In addressing the challenges posed by the application of anonymity in dissemination, there have been several suggestions for possible ways forward, some of which are now common

practice. For example, the employment of vignettes to present research or the use of pseudonyms, have both been proposed as adequate compensators (Kelly, 2009). However, neither of these may be satisfactory for the researcher who wants to deliberately and overtly identify their participants or elucidate specifically on actual empirical data in their findings.

Returning to the point raised earlier in this paper about making a difference to the world, and reflecting on Hammersley's comment that dissemination is also about attracting future funds and keeping one's job (particularly important for contract researchers in the UK), the practice of upholding the principle of anonymity may therefore position the qualitative researcher between a rock and a hard place in deciding whether or not to endorse it as a key ethical principle. On the one hand, to enhance their credibility the qualitative researcher needs to be able to demonstrate their practical use of established ethical codes of practice, illustrate their conceptual knowledge of ethics and associated constraints, and show themselves to be a researcher of responsibility and integrity. On the other hand, they are increasingly required to disseminate widely, get as much information 'out there' as possible, be involved in knowledge transfer and show their value for money as an academic capable of meeting the various demands imposed upon them. They also need to be demonstrating that they are accountable to funders and produce real-world 'results' that can be used in policy and organisational contexts. Necessarily, this can mean identifying research sites and participants – which may conflict with the expectation that the research is anonymised.

This is further complicated by interdisciplinary research and the conflict between disciplinary differences with regard to protecting, empowering and possibly even emancipating participants. Where this may be challenging for the career young researcher in particular is as a result of the likelihood that they are on short term research contracts and/or that they are

expected to prove their research and academic credentials via their dissemination activity, engagement in knowledge transfer and demonstration of their worth in terms of accountability to funders. If their research findings, and the way they want to present them, contrast with long standing normative expectations about principles and standards in qualitative research, they may find themselves – and in the worst case scenario, their career - in a tenuous position. There is no easy answer to this conundrum, and it is often left to the individual researcher to decide how to ‘play the game’ based on their own value system and integrity (Kennedy, 2005), walking the tightrope (Van den Hoonaard, 2002) between doing what they feel is right by their own research and what is expected of them according to the professional ethical codes of the academic profession that they wish to participate in and contribute to.

The implications of this are two-fold. First, that the need for individual researchers (and in relation to UK career young researchers in particular, those who are increasingly receiving much attention and support from research funding bodies seeking to nurture excellence in the next generation of academics) to work out their own individual path between the aforementioned rock and hard place flies in the face of consistency. At the point of dissemination, some may choose to uphold ethical codes of practice to the letter, others may choose to disregard them – albeit at their peril. Second, if this is the case – that the researcher is required to navigate their dissemination activities via their own value system, sense of responsibility to their research, and the standard ethical codes of the profession in which they work – then there needs to be a more explicit recognition that this is part of the job of being a research active academic. To facilitate this there needs to be a more overt, transparent discussion about the ways in which a qualitative researcher may (or may not) challenge well established principles of ethical practice, such as that of anonymity.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have presented some of the challenges we perceive in managing anonymity in the context of twenty first century qualitative research activity. Surrounded by various codes of practice and policies that promote anonymity as a normative given in social research, we have used our own respective doctoral experiences to provide evidence of when the upholding of anonymity may be problematic, unnecessary, or even undesirable. We have shown how anonymity can conflict with demands to disseminate widely, particularly on the internet where research outputs can often be accessed by anyone and for a long (if not indefinite) period of time. We have illustrated how anonymity may contrast with expectations from funding bodies about showing accountability, and engaging in knowledge transfer with the ‘real world’ of policy and practitioners. Finally, we have demonstrated that the information age – in particular the increasingly sophisticated use of internet search engines – has significant implications for researchers attempting to protect the identities of their participants and research sites in a bid to maintain confidentiality. Even though we both chose to disclose important pieces of information about our fieldsite/participants, neither of us feel we have breached the confidentiality of our participants.

In deciding how to present research, these types of questions contribute to broader discussions about the purpose and practice of academic research (Cannella and Lincoln, 2007) and the role of academics in society more generally. If the trend towards knowledge transfer continues in the UK, alongside evidence based research and producing ‘public benefit’ in social research, then researchers will have to address how best to contribute to these types of activities and whether or not this involves being open and frank about the origins of their research findings, which may necessarily conflict with the principle of anonymity. In this vein, the



principle of anonymity as an overarching guiding standard of social research, particularly at the point of dissemination, may require considerable review.

## References

Alterio, M. (2004) 'Collaborative journalling as a professional development tool', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28 (3): 321-332.

American Anthropological Association (2009) *AAA Code of Ethics*, available online at <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm> [accessed 20th June 2009].

American Sociological Association (1999) *Code of Ethics*, available online at <http://www.asanet.org/images/asa/docs/pdf/Ethics%20Code.pdf> [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2009].

Atkinson, D., Jackson, M. and Walmsley, J. (1997) *Forgotten Lives: Exploring the History of Learning Disability* (Kidderminster: BILD Publications).

Baez, B. (2002) 'Confidentiality in qualitative research: reflections on secrets, power and agency', *Qualitative Research*, 2 (1): 35-58.

Bonnell, V. (1980) 'The uses of theory, concepts and comparison in historical sociology' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (2): 156-173.

Bradshaw, M. (2003) 'A Politics of doing social research for fishery biologists, managers and industry', *Qualitative Research*, 3 (3): 359-376.

Butler, I. (2002) 'A Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research', *British Journal of Social Work*, 32: 239-248.

Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Cannella, G.S. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2007) 'Predatory vs. dialogic ethics: constructing an illusion or ethical practice as the core of research methods', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13 (3): 315-335.

Christensen, P. and Prout, A. (2002) 'Working with Ethical Symmetry in Social Research with Children' *Childhood*, 9 (4) 477-497.

Cornwall, A. and Jewkes, R. (1995) 'What is participatory research?', *Social Science and Medicine*, 41, 12: 1667-1776.

Darlington, Y. and Scott, D. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Practice: stories from the field* (Buckingham: Open University Press).

Department of Health (2005) *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care: Second Edition*, available online at [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4108962](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4108962) [accessed 20th June 2009].

Dunkerly, D. (1988) 'Historical methods and organization analysis: the case of a naval dockyard', in A. Bryman (ed) *Doing Research in Organizations* (London: Routledge): 82-95.

Economic and Social Research Council (2005) *Research Ethics Framework*, available online at

[http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC\\_Re\\_Ethics\\_Frame\\_tcm6-11291.pdf](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf) [accessed 20th June 2009].

Flicker, S., Haans, D., and Skinner, H. (2004) 'Ethical dilemmas in research on internet communities' *Qualitative Health Research*, 14 (1): 124-134.

Fyfe, N. and Milligan, C. (2003) 'Out of the shadows: Exploring contemporary geographies of voluntarism', *Progress in Human Geography*, 27 (4): 397-413.

Giordano, J., O'Reilly, M., Taylor, M., and Dogra, N. (2007) 'Confidentiality and autonomy: the challenge(s) of offering research participants a choice of disclosing their identity', *Qualitative Health Research*, 17 (2): 264-275.

Grinyer, A. (2002) 'The Anonymity of Research Participants', *Social Research Update*, Issue 36, available online at <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU36.html> [accessed 20th June 2009].

Hall, J. (1992) 'Where history and sociology meet: Forms of discourse and sociohistorical inquiry', *Sociological Theory*, 10 (2): 164-193.

Hammersley, M. (2003) 'Social Research today: some dilemmas and distinctions', *Qualitative Social Work*, 2 (1): 25-44.

Hookway, N. (2008) '“Entering the blogosphere”: some strategies for using blogs in social research', *Qualitative Research*, 8 (1): 91-113.

Huberman, M. (1995) 'The many modes of participatory evaluation', in J.B. Cousins and L.M. Earl (eds) *Participatory evaluation in education: studies in evaluation use and organizational learning* (London: Routledge): 103-112.

- James, N. and Busher, H. (2006) 'Credibility, authenticity and voice: dilemmas in online interviewing', *Qualitative Research*, 6 (3): 403-420.
- Jessop, B. (2000) 'The state and contradictions of the knowledge-driven economy', in J.R. Bryson, P.W. Daniels, N. Henry and J. Pollard (eds) *Knowledge, space, economy* (London: Routledge): 63-78.
- Joint Research Council's Skills Statement (2001) available online at <http://www.grad.ac.uk/downloads/documents/general/Joint%20Skills%20Statement.pdf> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2009].
- Kelly, A. (2009) 'In defence of anonymity: rejoining the criticism', *British Educational Research Journal*, 35 (3): 431-445.
- Kennedy, J.E. (2005) 'Grey Matter: ambiguities and complexities of ethics in research', *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 3, 2-4: 143-158.
- Marzano, M. (2007) 'Informed consent, deception, and research freedom in qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13 (3): 417-436.
- Mitchell, D., Traustadottir, R., Chapman, R., Townson, L., Ingham, N. and Ledger, S. (eds) (2006) *Exploring Experiences of Advocacy by People with Learning Disabilities: Testimonies of Resistance* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers):100-117.
- Nespor, J. (2000) 'Anonymity and place in qualitative inquiry', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6 (4): 546-569.
- Nissenbaum, H. (1999) 'The meaning of anonymity in an information age', *The Information Society: an international journal*, 15 (2): 141-144.

- Papacharissi, Z. (2002) 'The Virtual Sphere: the internet as a public sphere', *New Media and Society*, 4 (1): 9-27.
- Piper, H. and Simons, H. (2005) 'Ethical responsibility in social research', in B. Somekh and C. Lewin (eds) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (London: Sage): 56-63.
- Popay, J. and Williams, G. (1998) 'Qualitative Research and Evidence Based Healthcare', *Journal for the Royal Society of Medicine*, 91 (35): 32-37.
- Royal College of Nursing (2005) *Informed consent in health and social care research: RCN guidance for nurses* (London: RCN).
- Scott, S. (2004) 'Researching shyness: a contradiction in terms?', *Qualitative Research*, 4, 1: 91-105.
- Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research: a practical handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sage).
- Snyder, L. (2002) 'Confidentiality and anonymity: promises and practices', in van den Hoonaard, W.C. (ed) *Walking the Tightrope: ethical issues for qualitative researchers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press): 70-78.
- Social Research Association (2003) *Ethical Guidelines*, available online at <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/ethics03.pdf> [accessed 20th June 2009].
- Sparkes, A. (2007) 'Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: a story seeking consideration', *Qualitative Research*, 7 (4): 521-550.
- Stewart, K. and Williams, M. (2005) 'Researching online populations: the use of online focus groups for social research', *Qualitative Research*, 5 (4): 395-416.

- Tilley, E. (2006) Advocacy for people with learning difficulties: the role of two organisations (Unpublished PhD thesis, Milton Keynes, The Open University).
- Tilley, S. and Gormley, L. (2007) 'Canadian University Ethics Review: cultural complications translating principles into practice', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13 (3): 368-387.
- Tuchman, G. (1994) 'Historical Social Science: Methodologies, Methods, and Meanings' in N.Denzin and Y.Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (California: Sage): 306-323.
- Traustadottir, R. and Johnson, K. (eds) (2000) *Women with Intellectual Disabilities: Finding a Place in the World* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers).
- van den Hoonard, W.C. (ed) (2002) *Walking the Tightrope: ethical issues for qualitative researchers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- van den Hoonard, W.C. (2003) 'Is Anonymity an Artifact in Ethnographic Research?', *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 1 (2): 141-151.
- Walford, G. (2005) 'Research Ethical Guidelines and Anonymity', *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 28 (1): 83-93.
- Walmsley, J. (2001) 'Normalisation, emancipatory research and inclusive research in learning disability', *Disability and Society*, 16, 2: 187-205.
- Ward, A. (2009) *Is your Oral History Legal and Ethical?* The Oral History Society, available online at <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/index.php> [accessed 11th December 2009].

Wiles, R., Charles, V., Crow, G., and Heath, S. (2006) 'Researching Researchers: lessons for research ethics', *Qualitative Research*, 6 (3): 283-299.

Wiles, R., Crow, G., Heath, S., and Charles, V. (2008) 'The Management of Confidentiality and Anonymity in Social Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11 (5): 417-428.

Woodthorpe, K. (2007) *Negotiating Uncertainty and Ambiguity in the Contemporary Cemetery* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Sheffield, University of Sheffield).

## **LIZ TILLEY**

Liz Tilley is a lecturer in The Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University. Her research and teaching interests include disability, learning difficulties, advocacy, user movements and social care policy. Liz has also undertaken research on the history of the voluntary sector for people with learning difficulties and is Chair of the Social History of Learning Disability research group. Liz completed her PhD on advocacy for people with learning difficulties in 2006, and then worked as a Policy Advisor at the General Social Care Council before taking up her post as lecturer at the OU. *Address:* The Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. [email: e.k.tilley@open.ac.uk].

## **KATE WOODTHORPE**

Kate Woodthorpe is a lecturer in Sociology at the Centre for Death and Society, the University of Bath. Her research and teaching interests include death work, ethnography, and material

culture. Kate is the Programme Leader for the Foundation Degree in Funeral Services and the convenor of the British Sociological Association study group 'Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement'. She has published on the cemetery landscape, the media and death, and the undertaking of research in this area, and is co-editor of 'The Matter of Death: space, place and materiality', with Jenny Hockey and Carol Komaromy. *Address:* Centre for Death and Society, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY. [email: k.v.woodthorpe@bath.ac.uk].